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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000321

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KS](#)  
SUBJECT: SEOUL POLITICAL WRAP UP

Classified By: POL M/C James L. Wayman. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: President Lee Myung-bak begins his third year in office with poll numbers that are up despite a fierce, ongoing debate over his proposal to scrap the decision of the previous administration of Roh Moo-hyun to move half the government to a new capital, Sejong City, 150 kilometers south of Seoul. The ruling and opposition parties are eager to put the Sejong City controversy behind them to focus on the June 2 regional elections, which will set the stage for the 2012 presidential election. Former Democratic Party presidential candidate Chung Dong-young was readmitted to the party after running last spring as an independent in a by-election. Korean's are intensely focused on the 2010 Winter Olympics, enjoying many successes but sensitive to perceived slights to Korea's national pride; the Australian Embassy was evacuated after receiving a bomb threat in response to a controversial ruling by an Australian judge that went against Korean speed skaters. End summary.

#### Lee Myung-bak's Approval Ratings

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¶2. (C) A recent Korea Society Opinion Institute (KSOI) poll showed President Lee Myung-bak, who began his third year in office February 25, with a support rate of 44 percent, demonstrating a very different, upward trajectory than past South Korean presidents. Lee's approval rate in his second year in office is higher than that of all previous presidents' second year support rates except for Kim Dae-jung (48.5 percent). No previous president has rebounded like Lee did -- from a low of 15.2 percent in June 2008. The KSOI poll shows Lee's support rate down only slightly from an October 2009 high of 44.6 percent. His ruling Grand National Party also scored a higher support rate (39.9 percent) than the main opposition Democratic Party (24.7 percent).

#### Sejong City Controversy

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¶3. (C) President Lee's poll numbers are up despite a fierce ongoing debate over his proposal to scrap a decision made during the Roh Moo-hyun administration to move half the government to a new capital, Sejong City, 150 kilometers south of Seoul. The opposition parties are unified in their fight against the proposal. More troubling for Lee is that the debate has divided the ruling Grand National Party (GNP), with Park Geun-hye's faction -- some 50 of 169 GNP members -- staunch in its commitment to the original plan. It is difficult to imagine a happy ending to this controversy for the GNP. Even if Lee succeeds in forcing Park Geun-hye's faction to support his proposal, it would have to be voted out of four committees -- two of which the DP controls -- before the GNP could unilaterally force its passage in the National Assembly. The best-case scenario, according to GNP insiders, would be for President Lee to surrender quickly,

leaving Lee and Park Geun-hye each wounded, but with time to regroup for the June 2 regional elections.

#### June 2 Regional Elections

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¶4. (C) Governors, mayors, and provincial and city councils will be elected nationwide in the June 2 regional elections. Two of the most important races to watch will be the Seoul Mayor and Gyeonggi Governor contests. Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon, from the GNP, would be an odds-on winner for reelection. He is not, however, a GNP insider, and several party heavyweights are eager for the chance to run for what could be a stepping stone to the Blue House. Nevertheless, many analysts believe Mayor Oh's popularity among the public will overcome his lack of popularity in the party and that he will be the party's nominee. The GNP and DP will both make all-out efforts to win the Gyeonggi Governor's seat, currently held by the GNP's popular Kim Moon-soo. Gyeonggi Province, which surrounds Seoul, is increasingly viewed as a crucial swing state in presidential elections. Kim Moon-soo is likely to run for and win reelection, but has not announced. Parties will finalize nominations for races nationwide in April. The opposition DP hopes to frame the elections as a referendum on President Lee. The more important issue, however, will be the 2012 presidential race. Intra-party battles in the nominations process and election results that vindicate (or not) the parties' leadership are, in effect, the opening rounds of the 2012 race.

#### Olympic Pride

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¶5. (SBU) Koreans are intensely focused on the 2010 Winter Olympics, basking in the glow of success -- the ROK is ranked fifth in number of medals -- and sensitive to slights to Korea's national pride. Resentment flared briefly after a February 14 speed skating event when Korean skater Lee Jung-su won the gold in the 1,500-meter short track event, but the Korean skaters in second and third place fell in the last minutes of the race allowing American Apollo Ohno to pick up the silver medal. In the 2002 Winter Olympics, Ohno won the gold in speed skating after an Australian referee disqualified the Korean skater who came in first. That decision sparked such strong feelings that Ohno was later forced to cancel an appearance in Korea. On Thursday the same Australian referee disqualified another Korean skater -- a ruling that enabled the Chinese to win the gold medal. In response the Australian Embassy here was inundated with angry calls and forced to evacuate after receiving a bomb threat.

¶6. (U) Much of the ill will from that decision is probably already forgotten, however, in the euphoria that will greet today's victory by figure skater Kim Yu-na. Much of Korea came to a halt to watch her performance, complete with companies purchasing commercials that consisted of nothing more than people cheering her on.

#### National Assembly Happenings

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¶7. (SBU) The opposition Democratic Party (DP) readmitted Chung Dong-young as a party member on February 10. Chung, who ran in the 2007 presidential election as the DP candidate, left the party in April 2009 when he failed to secure the DP's nomination to run in a National Assembly by-election to fill a vacant seat in his hometown. Chung won the seat as an independent. His return to the party is a threat to current party chair Chung Sye-kyun's leadership, but the party decided it had more to gain by having Chung on board in the run up to the important June 2 regional elections.

¶8. (U) As of February 26, National Assembly seats are divided as follows:

169 GNP  
88 DP  
17 Liberty Forward Party

8 Pro-Park Alliance  
5 Democratic Labor Party  
2 Renewal of Korea Party  
1 New Progressive Party  
7 Independents

19. (U) The National Assembly is scheduled to be in session until February 28, when it should break for March recess. It should reconvene April 1 for a thirty-day session.  
TOKOLA